

When I first came to Evansville over seven years ago, Dave Wartenweiler was the second person I met. I asked directions for a meeting with the mayor, and he made some comment about, "You must be here for the interviews; which one are you?" He was obviously joking with false gruffness.

Dave has been with us since 1986, and he has affectionately been known as Wart since before then. He retired last week.

Some people just seem to know how to bring out the best in others; Wart built a truly great team at the Public Works Department. And I was glad to have him on my team.

As Public Works Superintendent, he oversaw the streets (from plowing in the winter to patching in the summer), city building and facility maintenance, mowing of parks and other city properties, park maintenance, cemetery operations, streetsweeping and maintenance of storm sewers and retention ponds, maintaining and operating the sanitary sewer and wastewater treatment systems, helping with infrastructure construction, and tree trimming and brush and leaf collection. In addition to the Public Works duties, Wart served as our Building Inspector.

The Idea to Combine

Over the past couple years, we have had a series of Committee of the Whole meetings to deliberately attend to building capacity for lean operations among city officials and staff. This means a commitment to improvement: a vision for top-notch service, practical training, a focus on results, and nurturing an organizational culture which looks past the status quo.

The idea to combine the management of the Public Works and Water & Light Departments first came up briefly in the fall of 2011. With then Water & Light Superintendent Scott George planning to retire, we considered the idea of combining the two departments when hiring. But the discussion was very brief, as we quickly decided the city was not ready for it, at least at that time.

It was mentioned again at a Committee of the Whole meeting in September 2012. When brainstorming possibilities for the future, there was a suggestion to combine all the utilities (electric, water, sewer, and stormwater) in a single department.

It gained real attention at our Committee of the Whole meeting in September 2013. By this time, Wart had decided he would be retiring at the end of the year. So succession planning for the Public Works Department was squarely on the meeting agenda. The committee noted that it would probably be very difficult to find a candidate with the qualifications for both the Public Works and Building Inspector roles which Wart had filled. In line with our ongoing discussion about streamlining operations while providing top-notch service, it was recommended to explore the idea of combining the management of the Public Works and Water & Light.

It was noted that each department oversees the operation and maintenance of infrastructure systems. They currently work together with our five-year capital improvements plan and when reviewing private construction projects. And many other municipalities operate with combined water and wastewater departments (after all, they are opposite ends of the same stream).

Clean Sheet of Paper

Subsequently, the two committees – Public Works and Water & Light – have met jointly several times to discuss a single superintendent and single committee overseeing the two departments. This is an ongoing discussion. There is definitely interest and a can-do attitude to the reorganization, but the actual details are still being worked out.

With several positions in the past, we have taken a “clean sheet of paper” approach to updating job descriptions. Instead of simply reviewing and updating the existing description, this approach starts with a clean sheet of paper and considers what we want the job to be (not just what it is now). After developing an outline or bullet-point list of responsibilities and duties, we can then review the existing job description to make sure nothing important was overlooked.

One of the immediate issues this helped identify was that we did not want to overwhelm a new combined superintendent. We couldn’t just add two forty-hour jobs and expect someone to then work eighty hours. There would be some streamlining, but a lot of duties would need to be delegated out.

Both the Public Works and Water & Light Departments have very good work crews. They have years of experience and know what they are doing. The plans are to still keep two separate departments and separate call-ins. The management is what will be combined as the two superintendents are recast as a single superintendent. Mark Sendelbach, our current Water & Light Superintendent, will be tagged with the new responsibilities of the joint position.

And he will work through two forepersons, one at each department. The foreperson positions for both departments are currently working forepersons, working in the field with their work crews. This will continue. But some of the supervisor aspects of the jobs will be heightened as they take on added management of work schedules and assignments.

Some duties, in particular recordkeeping and paperwork for state reports and grants, will likely be delegated to support staff at City Hall. And we’re contracting out for a separate Building Inspector position.

Luckily it is a relatively slow time of year for both departments, allowing a chance for everyone to ease into the change.

The other aspect of management is the City Council’s oversight. Currently the two departments operate under two separate committees, each composed of three members of the City Council. From a very practical standpoint, the two committees will be consolidated into a single committee.

Give It a Go

Mark observed that the two departments already share equipment and help each other out on smaller projects; they know each other even if they haven’t worked together. He’s going into this with a positive attitude. It shouldn’t be a hard transition, but still it is a transition and will take a little time.

In November and December, Mark spent some time job-shadowing Wart. They toured city facilities with overviews of the department's many operations (cemetery, parks, wastewater treatment, etc). They reviewed street and sidewalk conditions, reporting, and maintenance. They attended a meeting with the Public Works Departments from the county and area cities.

As the jobs are updated, there will be training – both for new responsibilities (for example, forestry) and for newly emphasized responsibilities (for example management). And there may well be other duties (for example, on-site construction supervision or wastewater treatment plant operations) which are further delegated or reorganized to accommodate the immediate changes.

For now, the formalities of the job descriptions are still being worked out. And combining the two committees will need to be enacted as an ordinance by the City Council.

While the details are being worked out over the next couple months, it is easy to call this a “work in progress.” And that's exactly where the emphasis should be: progress.